FEMME☆PHENOMENON
One Of Those HetaGirls

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Content Warning
Non-sexual nudity: Page 43

Femme☆Phenomenon: One Of Those HetaGirls is a fan anthology celebrating the leading ladies of Hetalia: World Stars who far and few inbetween, are often not given the screen time they deserve. From Asia, to Africa, to Europe, to Oceania, these beloved characters are getting their long awaited spotlight, just in time for International Women's Day 2025.
We aim to celebrate these women, with particular interest in their nations' flora and fauna.

We wish a happy International Women's Day to:
Ancient Egypt
Ancient Greece
Belarus
Belgium
Czechia
Hungary
Kenya
Liechtenstein
Monaco
Seychelles
Taiwan
Ukraine
Vietnam
Wy
and Zimbabwe

May the future bring these beloved characters more love, attention, and appreciation.

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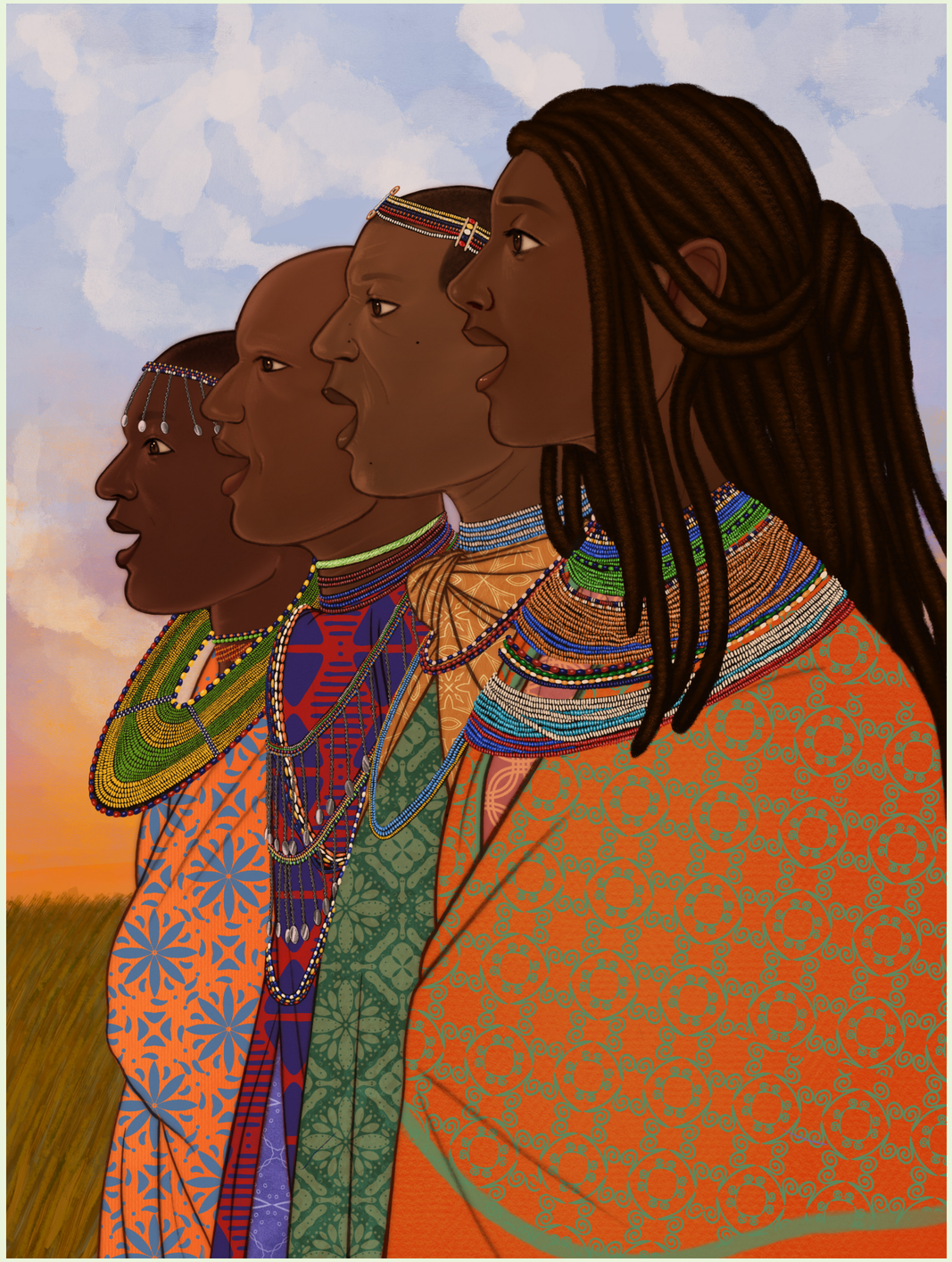

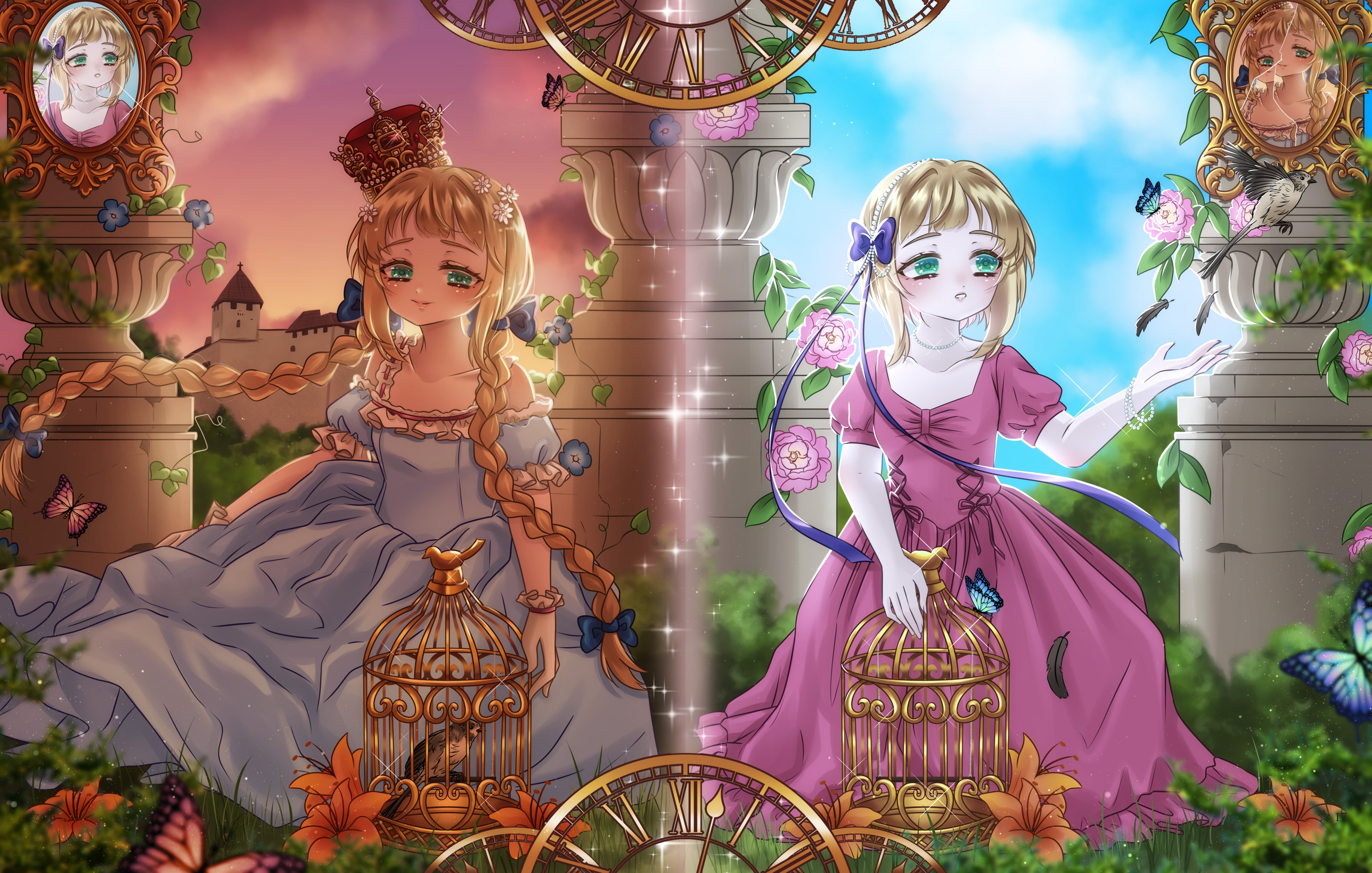

Hallo Vrienden!
Kom Binnekort
Eens Langs!
Groetjes Van België!

The Hunt for the Witch of the Woods

“Ivan, Natalya! Hurry home, dinner is almost ready!”

Katyusha’s voice rang out from the doorway as she heard the distant yet familiar voices of her little siblings returning home. A soft chuckle warmed the older girl’s chest as her siblings’ footsteps quickly picked up, racing each other back to the cottage.

“-did not!” Ivan shouted in protest, making it inside the cottage before his younger sister.

“Yes you did! You did cheat!” Natalya’s small voice pouted, the argument ceasing at the insistence of their older sister.

“Come now, there’s no need to bicker!” Katya gently scolded as she began to help Natalya out of her heavy coat, “Let’s get you both warmed up with a nice bowl of borscht and you two can tell me about your day!”

“I’m not hungry.” Natalya refuted, fighting against Katya as she tried to help her out of her extra layer of clothes.

“What?” To say Katyusha was surprised felt like an understatement, “But Talya, you love borscht! At least have a little bit, please?”

“I said I’m not hungry!”

Katya was taken aback at sister suddenly raising her voice, holding firm on her stance that she didn’t want her favorite meal before marching off to be alone in her room. As soon as she heard the bedroom door slam shut, Katya turned her attention to Ivan, a look of worry plastered across the older girl’s face.

“I’m really worried about Natalya, she hasn’t been acting like her usual self lately,” Katya uttered with a concerned frown, “Vanya, do you know what could have possibly gotten into her?”

Ivan seemed almost hesitant to answer Katya; his violet eyes shifting around nervously as his little hands tugged at his scarf.

“Vanya, what is it that you’re not telling me?” Katya’s tone became much firmer as she began to pry her brother for answers.

“I…” Ivan began to hesitate, only resuming as he saw Katya’s eyebrow cock in suspicion, “It’s just…the other day when Natalya and I were in town running errands we happened to overhear some older children talking, so Natalya decided we should go over and see what they were talking about and…um…well…they were talking about Baba Yaga…”

“Baba…Yaga?” Katyusha repeated; that definitely hadn’t been what she’d expected to hear.

“Da,” Ivan confirmed with a small nod, “The older children had told us that there had been sightings recently of Baba Yaga making her home in the forest near to us.”

“Oh Vanya, I’m sure those children were just trying to scare the two of you!” Katya tried her best to sound reassuring.

“I know, but I think it really got to Natalya,” Ivan began to explain in further detail,“Ever since she heard those rumors, Natalya won’t take our shortcut into town anymore since we have to cut through the woods.” He crossed his arms, letting out a small huff, “When we’re near the forest, she acts like we’re being followed.”

Katya offered her brother a soft, warmhearted smile, resting a hand on his head and giving his white blonde hair a gentle tussle.

“Why don’t you go eat your borscht before it gets cold?” Katya suggested, “I’ll go see if I can talk Natalya out of her room.”

Ivan returned his big sister’s kindhearted smile, giving her a nod before heading into the kitchen to enjoy his dinner. Now with her brother dealt with, Katya headed in the opposite direction to go deal with her more stubborn sibling.

“Natalya?” Katyusha called out to her baby sister as her fist thumped softly at the bedroom door, “Natalya, It’s Katya; is it alright if I come in for a moment?”

“I’m not coming out!” her sister shouted from the other side of the door.

“I’m not here to drag you out of your room, I just came to talk,” Katya did her best to sound reassuring, “Is that alright?”

It was silent for a minute before Natalya responded with a cautious “Alright.”

Katyusha cracked the bedroom door open slowly at first, trying not to spook her sister, before entering the room. Katya offered Natalya a gentle smile as her eyes spotted her little sister curled up in her bed, making a move to take a seat at the end of the bed.

“BE CAREFUL!” Natalya cried out suddenly, nearly giving her older sister a heart attack.

“What? What’s wrong?” Katya yelped, gripping her chest as her heart raced a mile a minute.

“You’re going to break it!” Natalya replied with an irritated huff.

Before Katya could ask just what on Earth her sister was talking about, Natalya threw back her blankets to reveal a strange net looking contraption.

“Natalya…just what is this?” Katya asked, staring at the contraption with continued confusion.

“I’ve been working on it for the past few nights, I just need to put the finishing touches on it!” Natalya looked fairly proud of her little invention, “When it’s done, I’m going to use it to capture Baba Yaga!”

The younger girl’s pride slowly began to fade as she saw the smile on her older sister’s face widen just enough for a laugh to slip through.

“Don’t laugh!” Natalya shouted at Katya, completely unamused by her sister’s response.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to laugh..” Katyusha apologized as she got the last of the giggles out of her system, “It’s just…is this why you’re skipping dinner?”

Natalya seemed hesitant to answer, but eventually she gave her sister a small nod.

“Oh…Talya…” Katyusha’s expression softened, her arms wrapping themselves around her little sister as she pulled the younger girl into a tight bear hug, “Vanya wasn’t kidding about those stories getting to you.”

“Ivan told you?!” Natalya groaned, trying to fight her way out of Katya’s arms, but the older girl’s grip was too strong, forcing her to surrender to her sister’s comforting embrace, “Just so you know, I’m not scared. I just want Baba Yaga to know she’s not welcome here.”

“And Vanya and I are very grateful to have such a brave little sister to protect us,” Katya was quick to praise, “But I assure you Natalya, you have nothing to worry; Baba Yaga isn’t out there in the woods. She’s just an old wives tale made up to keep small children from misbehaving.”

Natalya seemed to be considering the weight of her sister’s words before she asked in a small, uncertain voice, “Do…do you promise?”

“I promise.” Katya answered, crossing her fingers over her heart, “Now then, would you like to reconsider your stance on dinner tonight?”

Natalya mulled it over for a moment before countering with, “Can I eat in my room, just for tonight?”

“Just for tonight,” Katyusha agreed, giving her little sister another suffocating squeeze, “I’ll go bring you a bowl of borscht.”

Natalya let out a soft whine as Katya placed a gentle kiss on the top of her blonde head before finally releasing her little sister from her comforting death grip. The older girl left the room with naïve faith in her talk with Natalya, believing it to be a success. Little did she know, her sister was putting the finishing touches on her trap instead, determined to finish before Katya returned.

It had been nearly a month since the sisters had had their talk, and while Katyusha had left the conversation believing she’d been able to put her sister’s mind at ease, Natalya had spent her time waiting for just the right moment to put her plan into motion.

“Alright, I’m heading over to the farm to see if any of the crops are ready to be harvested,” Katya called out to her siblings as she headed for the door, “I expect you two to have all your chores done by the time I come home, da?”

“Da.” Ivan and Natalya answered in unison, making Katya chuckle as she gathered the last of her equipment.

Natalya’s heart raced as she watched her older sister from the window, her piercing blue eyes staying focused on Katya’s form until her sister disappeared completely from her line of sight.

This was it; the opportunity she’d been waiting for.

“Talya, what are you doing?” Ivan followed after his little sister as she made a mad dash towards her bedroom.

“We don’t have much time; Katya will only be gone until sundown!” Natalya exclaimed with a murmur, shoving her little body under her bed to retrieve her makeshift net from its hiding spot.

“What are you talking about?” Ivan’s tone was slowly turning from confusion into concern, “And what are you doing with that net?”

“I’m going to use it to catch Baba Yaga once and for all.” A mischievous grin stretched across Natalya’s little face, making Ivan’s stomach begin to churn.

“Talya-” Ivan tried to reason with his little sister, but her tiny form raced past him before he could get the full sentence out, “Talya, Talya WAIT!” Ivan tried to catch up with his sister, but the little girl was far too fast, having already made it to the edge of the forest by the time Ivan made it halfway out of the cottage. “Talya, wait!” Ivan tried to call out again, despite being out of breath, “Talya, please! It’s dangerous out there! Come back! I won’t tell Katya, I promise!”

“I KNOW WHAT I’M DOING!” Natalya snapped back, her voice echoing as her little feet continued to inch closer towards the forest’s entrance, *“I’LL BE BACK BEFORE KATYA COMES HOME! I PROMISE!”*

“TALYA-” Ivan cried his little sister’s name one more time, his feet beginning to shift slightly in her direction, but Natalya’s small figure had already disappeared into the thick cloud of shrubbery, “Oh no…” He whispered as the reality of the situation became more apparent with each passing second, “Oh no, no, no, no, NO!”

I need to find Katyusha! Ivan screamed at himself, his body kicking into gear as he raced as fast as he could to get his older sister’s help.

Katyusha had barely begun her work when the frantic cries of her younger brother caught her attention.

“Vanya?” Katya responded with confusion as Ivan came into view, “Vanya, what’s going on?” Her maternal nature quickly kicked in when she noticed a certain sister of hers was missing, “Where’s Natalya?”

“Natalya…she…” Katya rubbed a hand soothingly against Ivan’s back, encouraging him to take a moment to catch his breath before he continued, “She…she ran off..into the forest…”

“WHAT?!”

“I tried to stop her! I swear!” Ivan was fighting back tears, “But she was too fast, and she wouldn’t listen!”

“Ivan,” Katyusha grabbed her brother by the shoulders; the warmth that usually filled her eyes extinguished by a cold seriousness, “Listen to me, I need you to tell me exactly what happened.”

Ivan sniffled, wiping at his tear stained face as he began to recount everything he’d just witnessed to his eldest sister.

“…and I was about to run after her but she was already gone!” Ivan was practically wheezing by the time he was done, the poor thing having overworked his lungs.

All the color in Katya’s face was gone; a string of curses pouring from her lips as the horrors of the situation sank into every crevice of her mind.

“Alright…” Katya took a deep breath, forcing herself to regain her composure before laying out her plan, “Vanya, I’m going to need you to be brave for me and wait at home by yourself, alright? I need someone there in case Natalya comes back on her own.”

Ivan gave his sister a nod of understanding, his eyes shifting into a look of concern as he asked, “What..what about you? Where are you going Katyusha?”

Katyusha placed a hand on her brother’s head, rustling his snowy hair as the warmth returned to her big, blue eyes.

“I’m going into those woods to find our little sister and bring her home.”

Katyusha had forgotten just how terrifying the forest could be.

The older girl combed through the thick brush, trying (and failing) not to jump at every little sound as she called out to her missing sister.

“NATALYA!” Katya cried her sister’s name, jumping slightly when a small critter chirped back instead, “NATALYA, WHERE ARE YOU?”

A sharp snap of a branch made Katya freeze, her breathing became labored as fear quickly sinks into her system.

Calm down, you need to calm down! You’re no use to Natalya all worked up like this! Katya scolded herself, her breathing slowly becoming more steady.

It was at that moment that a small figure ran out from behind one of the tall trees, pointing a sharp weapon at Katyusha. Katya let out a loud shriek, throwing her hands over her face as she braced for an attack. But an attack never came. Katyusha didn’t understand what caused her attacker to stop, that is until the small creature began to speak in a familiar cadence.

“Katya?”

Katya slowly pulled her hands away from her face to find Natalya standing there in front of her, holding a butter knife tightly within her small grasp.

“T-Talya?” The confusion lasted less than a second before Katyusha was wrapping her arms around her sister, “TALYA! OH THANK GOODNESS! You had me worried sick!” A small frown became visible on Katya’s face as she more closely examined the utensil in her sister’s hand, “Is that one of my good butter knives?”

“It was for back up!” Natalya tried to argue, shoving the kitchenware back into her pocket, “And it’s a good thing I took it too! I had to get rid of my stupid, good for nothing net after it got stuck in a thorn bush on its first use!”

A part of Katyusha wanted to give her sister a lecture about taking without asking, but decided that it could wait. Right now, she was just happy to know that Natalya was safe and sound.

“Come on Talya, I’ll make some soup when we get back to warm us up…” Katya took Natalya’s hand and tried to guide her back in the direction she’d come, but the younger girl wouldn’t budge. Katya looked back at her sister, her eyes filled with concern as she asked, “Natalya? Is something wrong?”

“I can’t…I can’t go back Katya, not yet.” Natalya ripped her hand out from her older sister’s protective grasp, “I haven’t found her yet!”

“Who-” Katya was about to ask when she suddenly remembered just why her sister ran off to begin with, “Oh, I see.”

“I have to find her, Katya!” Natalya continued her plea, “I have to find her and catch her! It’s the only way I can know for sure that…” Tears began to well up in the corners of the little girl’s normally fearless eyes, “That you and Vanya will be okay…”

It was at that moment that everything clicked into place for Katyusha. Natalya’s fears in Baba Yaga weren’t rooted in the belief she could be stolen and eaten by some wicked witch who lived deep within these woods. No, Natalya’s fears had always been rooted in the belief that Baba Yaga could take away her only family.

“Oh, Talya,” Katyusha cooed softly, pulling her little sister back into her gentle embrace, “I’ve always admired your bravery, you know that right?” A kind smile warmed Katya’s face as she lightly brushed the tears from her sister’s cheeks, “But I’m the oldest, and it’s my job to keep you and Vanya safe.”

“But you’re scared of everything!” Natalya sniffled in protest.

Katya could only laugh in response, “Da, It’s true that I’m nowhere near as brave as you, but I take my job as your big sister very seriously Talya. Even if I’m scared, it will never stop me from keeping you two safe.”

“Promise?” Natalya asked, rubbing away the last of her tears and snot from her face.

“Promise,” Katya solidified her answer by pulling her sister into one of her near smothering bear hugs, giggling when Natalya started to beg for her freedom back, “Alright then, I think we’ve been out here long enough.” Katyusha released Natalya from her tight embrace, offering her sister her hand instead, “Ready to go home, Talya?”

“Da.” Natalya nodded before taking Katyusha’s hand, the sisters venturing back into the hauntingly ethereal woodlands.

“My feet hurt!” Natalya whined, stumbling behind her older sister, “Do you even know where we’re going?”

“I know approximately where we’re going.” Katyusha lied, “Just hang in there a little longer, okay?”

It didn’t seem to take long before the sisters had found themselves all turned around in the dense forest, but Katya was determined to keep both their spirits high as Natalya let out another frustrated groan.

“Don’t worry Talya, we’ll be out of here in no time.” The older girl gave her sister’s hand a reassuring squeeze. Despite her complaints, Natalya pushed herself forward, putting her trust fully in the hands of her sister and her promise that they would be home soon.

“Do you smell that?” Natalya stopped suddenly, sniffing the air, “That smells like honey cake…” She gave another sniff, “And sharlotka…and they’ve just finished baking!”

Katyusha yelped as Natalya ripped herself away from her older sister’s grasp. Katya tried her best to quickly take hold of Natalya’s hand, but once again the younger girl was too fast as she fled towards the path holding the sweet promise of pastries.

“Natalya!” Katya cursed under her breath, hiking up her skirt as she marched after her little sister, “Natalya, get back here this instant!”

Thankfully it didn’t take her long to catch up to Natalya, Katya sighing in relief as she found her sister clinging to the side of a large oak tree.

“There you are! Natalya, you can’t run off like that!” Katya tried to put on an authoritative voice, but something in the distance had Natalya’s full attention. Katyusha’s voice shifted to a much gentler octave, knitting her eyebrows into a look of concern, “Talya, what is it? What’s wrong?”

“It’s her…” Natalya whispered, her hand shaking so badly it was a miracle she could still manage to lift a finger and point, “Katya…It’s her….Baba Yaga. She’s here.”

Katyusha’s eyes followed along where her little sister’s index finger was pointing, a sudden look of dread washing over her face as she spotted a fairly small, but undeniable structure of a cottage in the middle of the forest.

“Katya, what are we going to do?” Natalya’s voice was barely a whisper as she reached for her sister’s skirt, clutching at the fabric like a precious lifeline.

But Katya couldn’t respond, the older girl too paralyzed with fear to do anything else but just continue to stare at the eerie cottage.

Stop it, stop it right now Katyusha! The sharp sting from her hands colliding with her face managed to snap Katya out of her terrified trance. You promised Natalya you wouldbe brave, remember? You need to be brave…for her.

Katya took a series of deep, calming breaths to squash the last of her nerves before slowly crouching low to the ground, her attention on the small girl still clinging to her skirts.

“Natalya, I need you to wait here, okay?” Katya instructed, running her fingers tenderly through the younger girl’s hair, “I’m going to see if anyone is home and can help us.”

“Wait,” Natalya fished through her pockets, pulling out her butter knife and holding it out to her sister, “Just in case.”

Katya offered her sister a kind smile as thanks, taking the butter knife and shoving it into her own pocket. She gave Natalya a soft kiss on the forehead before rising herself off the forest floor, her attention solely on the ominous lodgings ahead of her.

The smell of cakes and pastries was near unbearable the closer Katya got, the sweet aroma acting almost like a siren's call to her aching belly. Katya dug a hand into her pockets, the cool metal of the utensil bringing just enough comfort to encourage her to continue forward.

"He-Hello?" Katya's voice shook as she gently wrapped a fist upon the front door, "Is anyone there? My sister and I are lost and..."

The jiggling of the doorknob made Katya freeze, her grip on her hidden weapons tightening as the cottage door slowly began to open, revealing the home's mysterious owner. To Katya's surprise (and relief), the creepy cottage didn't belong to some haggard old forest witch; quite the opposite in fact. Standing in the doorway was a comely young woman just a bit older than Katyusha herself. Her long, golden brown hair was held back in a yellow kerchief and her eyes were as vibrant and green as the forest surrounding them. The young woman's face was one that Katya recognized to be very kind...and very familiar...

"Miss..Miss Elizabeta?"

"Katyusha?" Elizabeta said in a tone just as surprised as the other girl's, "What on Earth are you doing out here?"

"I should be asking you the same!" Katyusha couldn't help but to laugh as her fear instantly melted away, "Is Mr. Roderich here as well?"

"Oh goodness no! Roderich wouldn't be able to last even an hour out here without the comforts of modern living!" Elizabeta joined in Katya's laughter, "It's just me; I come to this little cottage when I just need to get away for some peace and quiet, it's like my personal sanctuary! Now then, what's your story Miss Katyusha?"

"Oh! Right!" A light shade of red dusted Katya's cheeks as she began to recount her tale to Elizabeta: Natalya's belief and determination in capturing Baba Yaga, to Katya herself having to run into the forest after her little sister to bring her back home, to the two sisters inevitably finding themselves lost and stumbling upon Elizabeta's cottage; which they may or may not have believed was actually Baba Yaga's hut for a brief moment.

"Oh, you poor things!" Elizabeta cooed once Katya finished her recollection, "You must be exhausted, the both of you! Why don't the two of you come inside for a bit? I'll make some tea and get you both something nice to eat while you rest up, yeah?" Elizabeta offered, her viridian eyes glancing around, "In fact, where is Natalya?"

Katyusha turned her head sharply towards the spot she'd left Natalya to wait for her, a small smile creeping along her face when she glimpsed her sister's tiny blonde hair peeking out from behind the large oak tree.

"Natalya!" Katya called out from the threshold, "Natalya, it's alright, you can come out!"

Cautiously, Natalya began to creep out from behind the towering tree, a look of skepticism still very much present in her deep blue eyes.

Katya smiled warmly, motioning to her sister with an inviting hand, "There's nothing to be afraid of Talya, I promise."

Before Katya could blink, Natalya had managed to dart from her hiding spot back to her older sister's side, Katya's smile widening just slightly as she felt Natalya's tiny hand slipping back into her grasp.

"Natalya, you remember Miss Elizabeta?" Katya asked, satisfied with the small nod she received as an answer, "Well, this is her cottage and she's been nice enough to let us stay for a while to rest up and has even offered to make us something to eat."

Natalya's ears seemed to perk up as Katyusha mentioned the promise of a meal.

"Does that mean I can have some of the honey cake and sharlotka I smelled?" The older girls couldn't help but giggle as they watched Natalya's face beam with excitement.

"Of course you can, dear!" Elizabeta smiled, backing away from the threshold, "But first, let's get you two inside."

Katya was about to set foot in the cabin when a tug at her skirt made her take pause. She glanced down to see Natalya's tiny face looking back up at her.

"Natalya? What is it?" Katya asked, a hint of worry in her voice.

"I just...I just wanted to say thank you...for coming to save me..." Natalya shifted her gaze away from her sister's as she continued on, "And also that...I'm sorry, for getting us lost."

"Oh...Talya..." Katya cupped her sister's face in her hands once she noticed tears beginning to well up in the corners of her eyes, "Now you listen here; you're my baby sister and I will always be there for you. No matter what trouble you may cause, I will always be there to get you out of it, got it?"

Natalya gave her head a gentle nod, a few stray tears rolling down her cheeks, "I love you Katyusha."

"I love you too, Natalya." Katyusha returned, wiping the tears from her little sister's face before giving her a quick kiss of the cheek, "Now, let's not keep Miss Elizabeta waiting, da? I bet she has a nice big piece of honey cake with your name written all over it."

Natalya eagerly bobbed her head in agreement, Katyusha only able to respond with a kind hearted laugh as the sisters took ahold of the other's hand, the knowledge that they would be the only ones to know the truth behind the witch in the woods, as they set foot in Elizabeta's hidden sanctuary.

Soul of a Flower

A comic by Pachi 八千

WHEN YOU GIVE ME LIGHT, MAY YOU REMEMBER THE WARMTH...

OF THE FIRE THAT BREATHES LIFE INTO THE KITCHEN GOD.

WHEN YOU WATER MY ROOTS, MAY YOU THINK OF THE CARP...

WHO WHISKS THE KITCHEN GOD TO THE SKIES ABOVE.

WHEN YOU PRUNE MY BRANCHES, MAY YOU BE A HUNTER IN THE FOREST...

FIRM AND FLEXIBLE LIKE BAMBOO, AND TAKING NO MORE THAN NEEDED.

WHEN YOU PICK MY LEAVES, MAY IT SOOTHE YOUR WOUNDS...

FROM UNSEEN DANGERS, LIKE A SNAKE WAITING TO STRIKE ITS PREY.

WHEN THE SEASONS COME AND GO, MAY YOU CHERISH...
THE BLOSSOMS THAT REMAINED VIBRANT IN DARK TIMES.
WHEN THEIR PETALS FALL GENTLY DOWN TO THE EARTH...
MAY YOU SUSTAIN THE SEEDS OF HOPE FOR ALL TIME.

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PAPA Says :
•Bonjour ma vie <3
Says :
•Hello Papa :3
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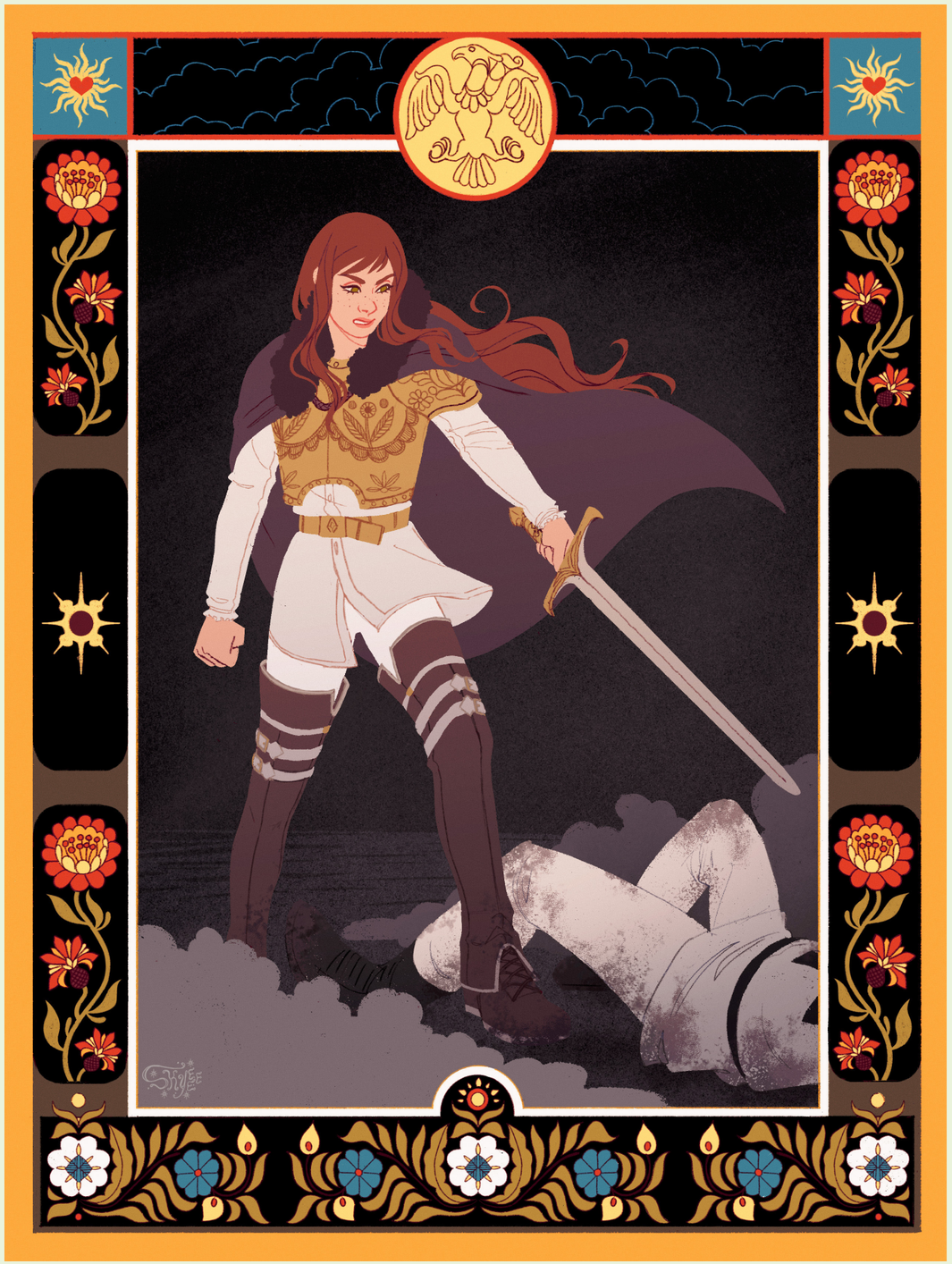
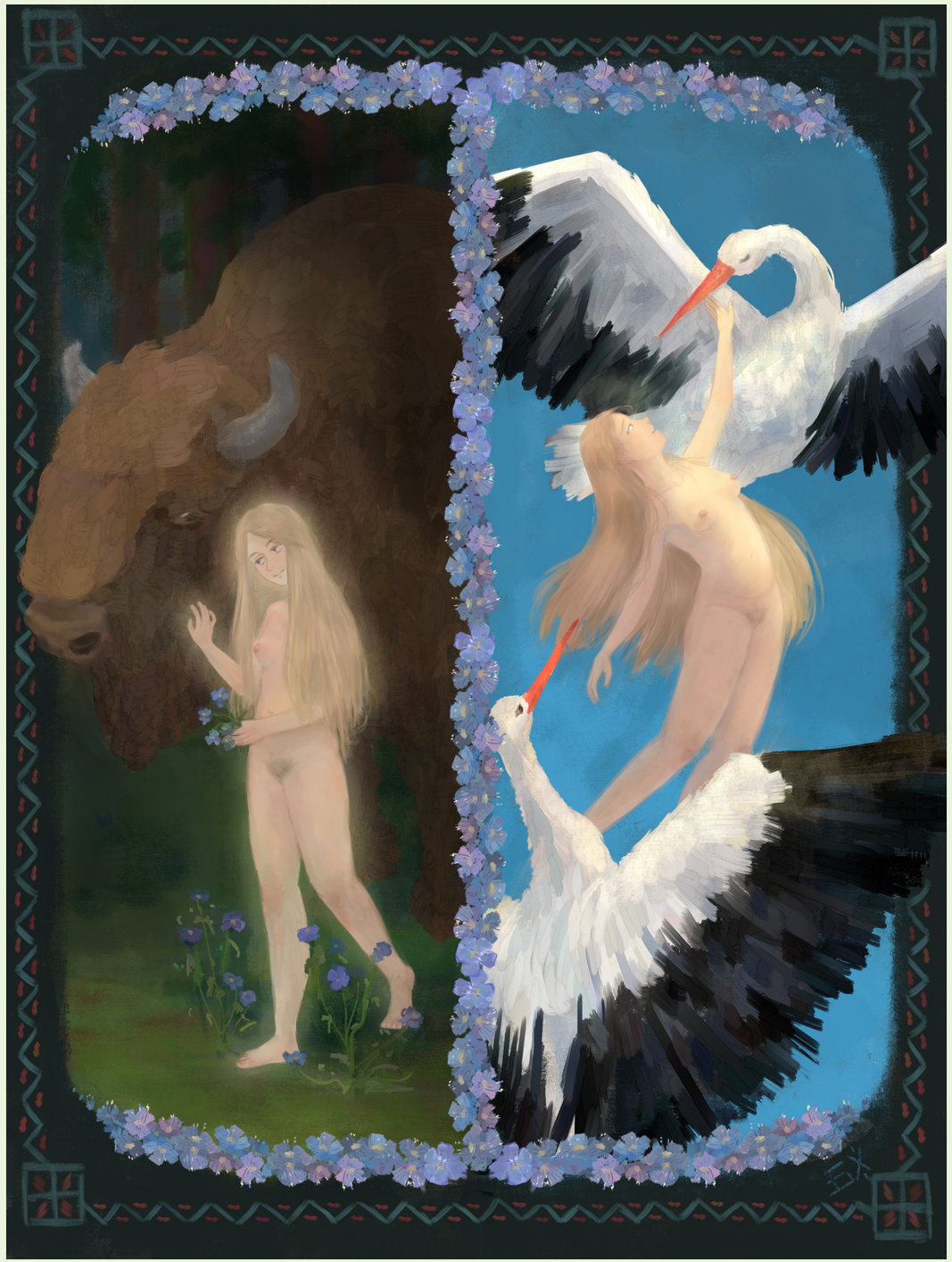




ORSZÁGOS KÉKTÚRA

Changing Seasons

The ribbon no longer smelled like Erika's shampoo, but Natalya continued to tie it around her swan-like neck each morning. Its fraying ends tickled her collarbone as she situated the lopsided bow just right of her throat, and Natalya found herself humming as she braided her long, ash blond hair into a neat plait.

Heat washed gently over her as she walked around the garden. Still humming, she retrieved empty glasses and teacups and saucers from their places and brought them into the kitchen to be washed later. She could feel the spirits that inhabited her humble home and sprawling gardens resting peacefully, full of vodka, cream, honey, or tea.

Soil collected along the creases of her palms and the dips around her nails. She preferred to go without gloves this time of the year, but as she moved lettuce heads and mustard greens into her waiting basket, Natalya slowed as her humming died.

Needle pricks heated her eyes as tears gathered.

It had been years.

Her heart felt weighted, slowly pulling down her chest and towards her stomach.
It had been years.

No letters, let alone visits.

It was like Ivan didn't care – had never cared. About her.

How Natalya wished she could stop caring in return. Her brother didn't deserve to take up so much space in her heart, if she didn't take up space in his.

Her breath shuttered as one of her thin hands rose to her throat, calloused fingers brushing over Erika's ribbon.

She'd promised the pain would get easier.

And then she'd left, too, but unlike Ivan, she'd left a piece of herself behind – her favored ribbon, and with it, a promise.

She even sent letters, each one reread and folded and refolded so often that the oldest ones were about to fall apart.

Swallowing the stone in her throat, Natalya allowed grief to wash through her. It continued to leave her heart heavy as memories clasped around it like rotted roots. Natalya didn't have the strength to rip them out, but she found herself still able to breathe as their tendrils took up space around her ribs.

Maybe the pain *was* getting easier to weather.

Natalya rose, humming again as she walked around to the other side of her cottage.

Woven willow branches created an arch leading from the outside tea table to the meadow. White ribbons were still woven through the tops of the arches, dangling little stars, suns, and moons that cast rainbows over the grass and wood.

Natalya's memory took form, and she stood at the tunnel's mouth as she witnessed an echo of her and Erika sprinting towards her. A smile brightened Erika's face and utterly transformed Natalya's. Years ago, she would never have recognized herself and would never have fathomed someone melting the ice of her heart enough to soften her features in such a way.

On either side of the tunnel were calla lilies, Erika's favorite flowers. She'd helped Natalya plant their bulbs, and they'd tangled themselves with each other beneath their stars and suns and moons.

The bottom curve of a moon resting in her palm, Natalya wondered not for the first time if she had pushed Erika. Pushed her to visit. Pushed her to stay. Pushed her to make vows she hadn't known she could keep.

Witches took their oaths seriously.

They were supposed to, anyway. Some took their vows of secrecy so close to heart that they went as far as to sew their lips shut with enchanted thread.

Ivan had branded himself a warlock – an oath-breaker – when he left his sisters behind to chase what might as well be smoke and moonlight.

Erika couldn't have known the severity of the vows she'd been sealing with blood, ash, and bone. She couldn't have known; Natalya should have done more to explain, to ensure she understood.

Yet… she hadn't looked at Natalya with disgust or resentment or blame.

The day she'd left, she'd looked crestfallen and guilty.

It should have been Natalya who shouldered that shame.

"I won't be gone forever," Erika had said while untying the dark blue ribbon from her honey-gold hair. "I know you can't leave your mountain for long."

She'd wanted to travel. To see beyond the mountains she'd known her entire life. For years, she'd dreamed of long stretches of sand, of flat fields of grass that stretched out like an ocean, of crashing waves, of animals of all colors and shapes and sizes.
Of adventure she could not find while tethered to these woods as Natalya was.

But. It wasn't forever.

Erika had promised.

Natalya drew in a deep breath and calmed her racing heart as she left the moons and suns and stars to finish gathering what she needed for tonight's dinner.

Natalya's secret to reading her clients' fortunes involved ignoring their futures entirely. She didn't care, and what the future held often wasn't the crux of whatever issue people came to her for, anyway.

Once her latest client was gone, she locked the door and pulled a stick of chalk from a small bag hanging next to it. The hair on her arms rose as she traced back over old sigils, the swirls and slashes giving the briefest of shimmers as they pulled power out of her. She exhaled once done, not even flinching at the brief sting of pain that danced over her fingertips like static.

It was only once done that Natalya remembered she should have swept first, guiding any residual energy from her clients out the door.

She glanced at the broom propped up by the door, considering.

Oh, well. Leaving that alone until tomorrow wouldn't kill her or disrupt her wards.

Humming, she turned her attention to her card decks and dice first. She cleansed the latter by dumping them into a sugar dish. She'd filled with salt she had turned black by mixing it counterclockwise with incense ash and iron shavings from her favorite cast iron pan.

For the cards, all they needed was to be shuffled a few times before being sorted back into a specific order. Natalya kept humming all the while as a spade card jumped out of the deck she was currently shuffling.

She didn't recognize the song she hummed at first. Soon as she did, she froze, escaped seven of spades in hand. Her broom tipped, falling in slow motion until it clattered against the hardwood floor.

"I miss him, too."

No. No, no, no, no, no.

Natalya refused to think about this, refused to think about her, refused to think about him.

She picked the broom back up. The gentle swish, hush of its straw against her floor was the only sound she could make out against the roar of her heartbeat in her ears.

The broom shifted like it might tip over again but thankfully remained in place.

The table and counters were wiped down. The dishes were washed and set up to dry. The shelves were dusted, each book and nick nack cleaned and returned to their spot.

A cup of coffee was set onto the mantle for one spirit. Vodka was poured into a short glass and left in the garden for another.

Natalya felt nothing as she sat in her plush armchair in front of—

She hadn't lit a fire. There was no book in her hands.

She shivered and looked over, seeing that she'd left her window open.

Pink lips pressed into a thin line, Natalya ignored the window and grabbed a long match from the ornate holder next to her fireplace. Within moments, dancing flames bathed her pale skin and ash blond hair in reds and oranges and yellows. Her pale blue eyes stung; she blinked hard and stood, turned, grabbed the book she'd been reading.

The main character reminded her of her last client. A hopeless romantic—emphasis on hopeless—whose life of passivity and indecision could only mean that his story was fated to end in tragedy.

I don't care, Natalya told herself.

She tried to make herself comfortable.

Incomprehensible rage seized her. She was on her feet, and before she could process that she'd even moved, Natalya ripped the paperback apart and chucked them into the fire.

Escaped pages fluttered around her as she stared into the flames, body trembling and eyes hot with tears she couldn't bring herself to shed.

It was always the little things.

In time with the antique clock's second hand, Natalya chopped carrot after carrot, then dumped the slices into the pot before the onions could burn.

Stir.

Chop celery in time with the antique clock's second hand.

Dump.

Stir.

The sizzling did little to calm her mind.

If anything, it only stoked her anger further. The sound, the smell… it dredged memories that dared to lighten her heart just before the weight of absence pulled it down again.

Natalya poured vegetable broth she'd stored yesterday into the pot. As she did, the spirit that resided in her fireplace alerted her to someone entering the garden.

The careful knock at the front door was shy, quiet, unsure. It was the sort of knock from someone already apologizing for their intrusion. Like they hoped to be ignored, so they could claim they tried and not feel ashamed of their own passiveness and timorousness.

Such cowardice was bellows to the flames of Natalya's rage.

She stabbed the wooden cutting board hard enough for a crack to split it top to bottom.

Her face like thunder, Natalya stormed towards the door.

Wet, teal eyes widened as the door swung open fast and hard enough to make the hinges protest. Chapped lips parted around an apology stuck in her throat, and despite being the same height as Natalya, this girl shrunk down before her, as if expecting to be trampled.

"M-my apol–"

"If you're so apologetic this early, then our meeting doesn't bode well. What is it."

Her voice flattened, making her question sound more like an incomplete command.

"I-I–"

"Out with it. I've got something on the stove, and I don't need it burning, because of your–"

"It's my brother." Erika – ah yes, this was that girl the cobbler down in the village had taken in two winters ago - trembled like the last leaf of autumn despite the summer's balmy heat.

Sweat trickled down the side of her neck, and jaggedly-cut bangs stuck to her damp forehead. The dark blue ribbon had slipped; it was inches away from falling from her straw-like hair.

It took a moment for her words to sink in.

Hot rage turned to blistering ice, and Natalya's eyes narrowed to knife slits.

"What about him." Natalya heard her voice but didn't feel her lips move. Her breath clouded, the temperature dropping around her.

"He…" Erika took a step back, away from the frost sprouting, covering the cobblestones at Natalya's feet like moss. "He's ill, and he can't work, and I don't… I can't… Please… I need–"

"You need nothing." The hollowness of Natalya's voice made Erika flinch. "If he needs something so badly, send him."

"H-he can't!" Erika's hands clasped in front of her chest as she stepped forward. Her nose reddened as her breath wisped like a prayer. "He's too weak–"

"They always are, aren't they."

"H-he… you…" Erika stilled, eyes downcast. Tears continued to stream down her round, flushed cheeks. "… He was right about you."

She wasn't talking about Ivan, but Natalya still flinched.

With fire in her eyes that cracked Natalya's resolve, Erika met her gaze again. "What use is power like yours if you won't help anyone with it?!"

She opened her mouth again to say more, froze, and turned, sprinting away.

The white heat of Erika's fury stole Natalya's rage like a cat stealing an infant's breath, leaving her sagging against the door frame.

Natalya wanted to hate her more for it but only felt tired.

She closed the door with a soft click and returned to the kitchen just as rain began to patter against the window above the sink.

She moved the pot before it could boil over; she turned the heat on the back burner to low. With the front right burner still red, Natalya pulled out another pot, this one cast iron forged from nails, spikes, and spear tips. She'd nearly burned her fingerprints off making this thing.

It had collected hope and despair, love and grief.

Next, she pulled out a large, circular chopping board, cut from a tree that had grown in the middle of a fairy ring, before the land had been stripped and used to build a now-abandoned church. She often reserved it and the iron pot for spirit work, but if something was ailing Basch enough to keep the prideful bastard from his work, she needed her most powerful items to keep him on this side of the Veil.

First, she needed water, and she had a full jar of sun-blessed spring water ready to use. She poured it into the pot, the water sizzling soon as it hit the heated metal. It wouldn't take long for the pot to come to a rolling boil, so she grabbed a large bowl next. The glass was treated and spelled to withstand any heat short of being cast directly into a bonfire, so Natalya fit it into her pot before gathering the rest of her ingredients.

It didn't take long, and as she piped tvorog paste – mixed with bits of strawberries from her garden and a touch of honey from the hive behind her cottage – onto the cutting board to sit, chunks of dark chocolate melted in the glass bowl.

As Natalya worked, the rain shifted from a sprinkle to a downpour. The sky was dark as night, but Natalya only asked for its aid as she continued to work and pray and cast.

By dusk, she had a container of chocolate-glazed cheese bars, and she allowed the rain to wash over her as she carried it past her garden, through the forest, and down the steep side of her mountain. The desserts never got wet.

The cobbler was easy enough to find; Natalya had gotten her boots from here only a year ago.

It was closed, as expected. Natalya hesitated before knocking on the door, remembering the fire in Erika's eyes.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, she knocked, set the enchanted desserts by the door, and ran.

As Erika pointed at stars and drew imaginary lines between them, Natalya felt like she was seeing the night sky for the first time.

Snow held up pillar candles at their sides, the midwinter wind teasing their flames and deepening the flush on the women's cheeks. There was a dark void in the sky where the moon rested, tucked away from where it couldn't reflect the sun's light. The mugs beside Natalya and Erika had long-since gone cold, the cider gone and leaving Natalya still feeling warm as she raised her eyes from Erika's smiling profile to the sky above them.

None of the constellations Erika named came from books. Instead, she shared myths her brother had invented to make her smile. Yet, she spoke with such confidence and love that Natalya could imagine the tales connecting them to people lying in this very meadow centuries before they were born.

Pulling her dark blue cloak tighter around her, Natalya listened. Cold was slowly seeping through her layers of clothes, but she couldn't bear the thought of ending this moment.

If everything froze, if she and Erika were suddenly encased in ice, would it be so bad? To live in this moment forever?

She turned her head as Erika weaved a tale of a maiden melting the block of ice imprisoning her lover's heart.

Honey blond strands brushed over Erika's round face, and plumes of white rose from her coral-colored lips like fervent prayers.

The urge to capture those prayers between her lips surged through Natalya, and heat prickled across her face and left her head feeling light.

Mouth dry, she rasped, "Let's go. I'm cold."

Erika was still pointing at a star as she turned her head, large eyes blinking slowly. She smiled shyly, as if she'd heard the want in Natalya's voice.

"Okay," she said, jumping up into a crouch and knocking over one of the candles. Its flame spluttered against snow and sent up a thin trail of smoke with its final exhale.

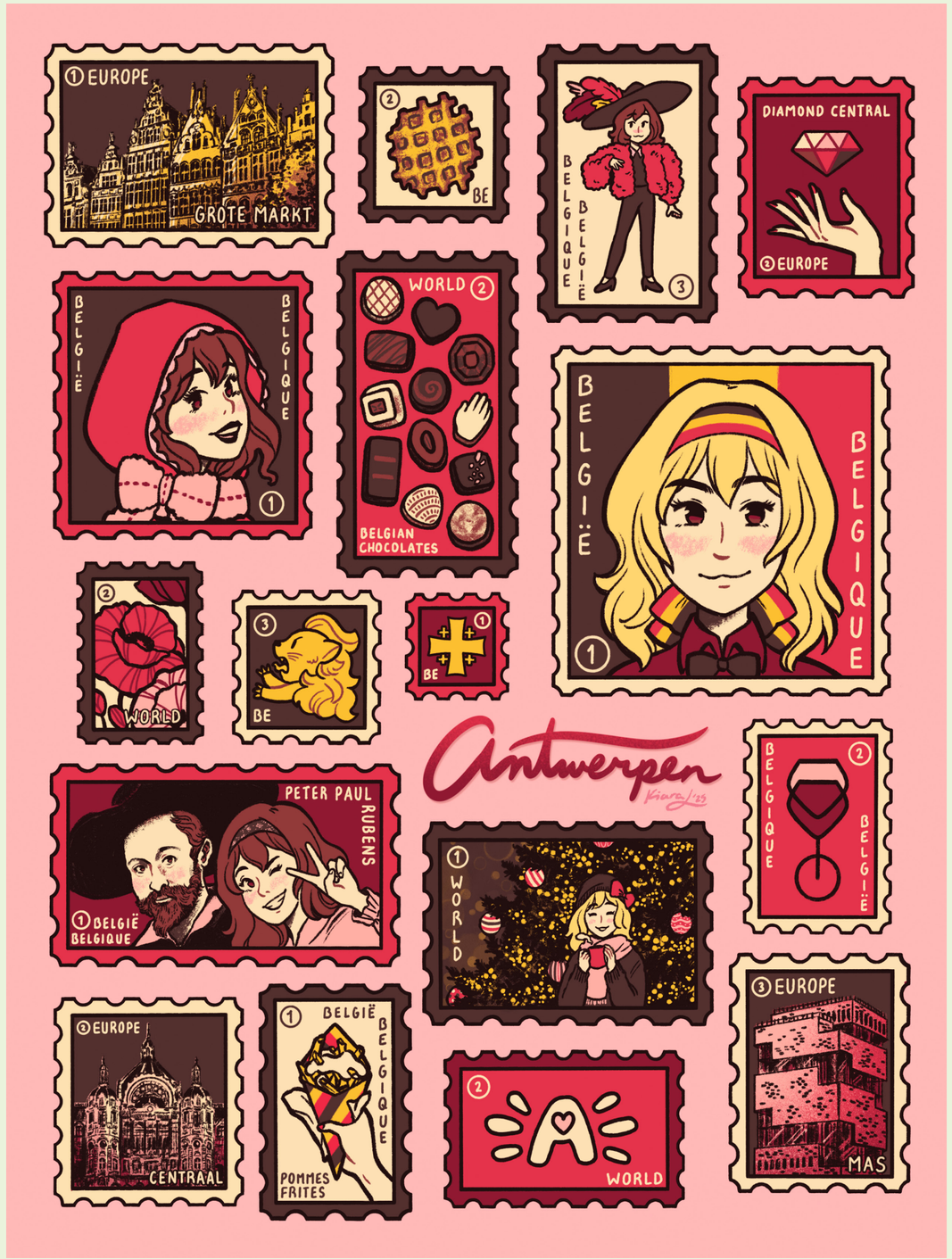
"Let's race."

"You'll lose," Natalya told her.

"We'll see." Erika pulled the dark green hood of her cape higher, smile switching from shy to mischievous.

She took off, and Natalya pushed out a long breath before getting up and knocking out the rest of the candles, tails of smoke rising as she shook snow off her cloak.

The stars watched as Natalya walked in Erika's footprints all the way home.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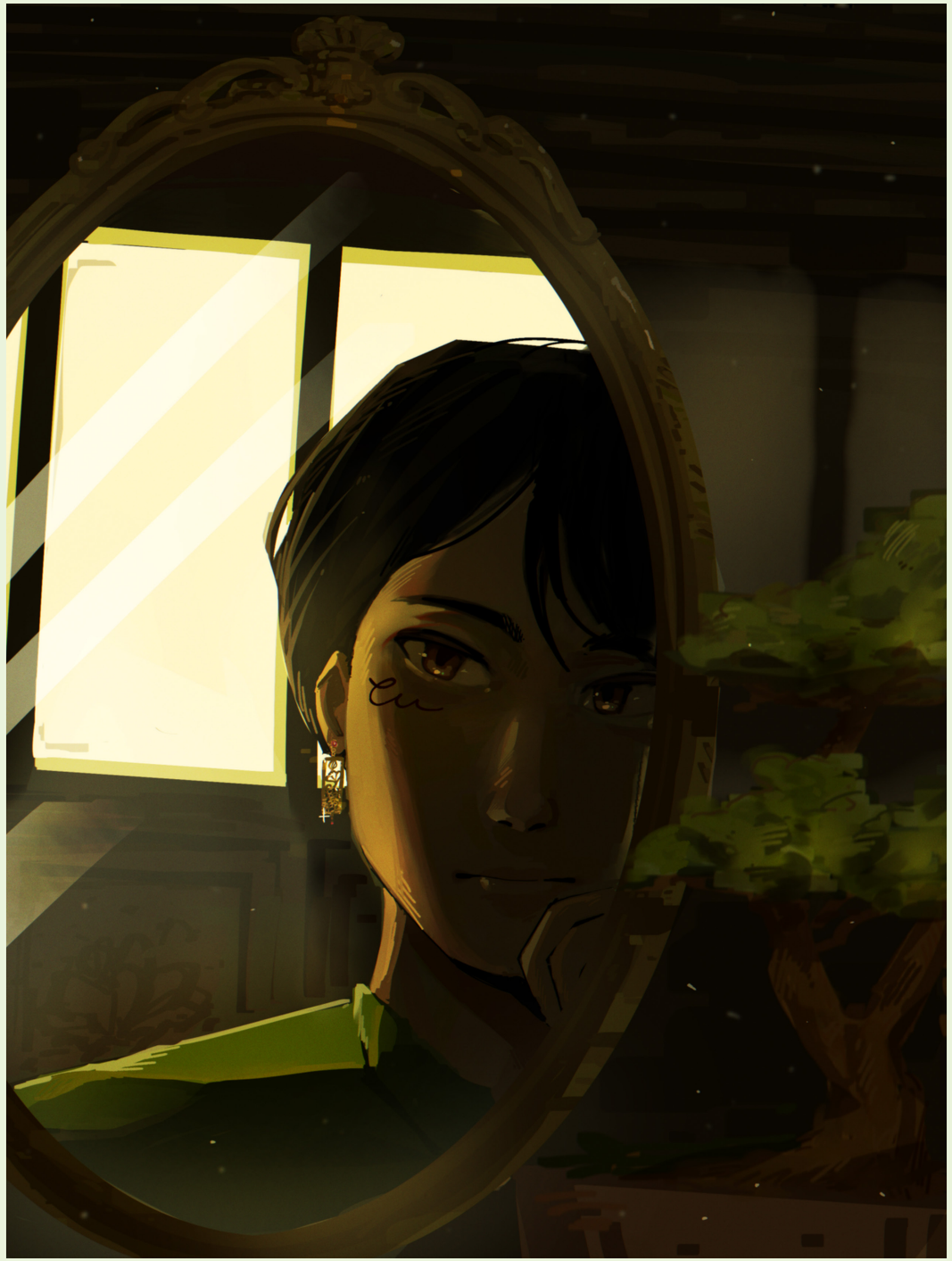

CESKA REPUBLIKA

Seychelles

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☆ 77

Illus. Kinsduru

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